

The Jewish Lifecycles: Death

Two overriding principles govern the Jewish approach to death and mourning. The first is ***Kavod Ha-Met*** (Honoring the Dead). It is of the utmost importance to treat the body with respect and care from the time of death until the burial is completed. The second is the view that death is a **Natural Process**: Death is considered a natural part of the life cycle and the body is returned to the earth whence it came. Hence everything associated with the body for burial is that which will decompose with the body, facilitating its return "from ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

Prior to Burial

It is traditional to wash the body in preparation for burial. This process is called ***Taharah*** (Purification). *Taharah* is accomplished by a specially trained group of people. Not every community has a group which can do *Taharah*. Embalming is a violation of the Jewish tradition because it impedes the natural process of decomposition. The body, once washed, is dressed in a plain linen shroud called ***Tachrichim***. Some people may be buried in their *tallit* (prayer shawl). When this is done, the *tzitzit* (corner fringes) are cut off, signifying that the *tallit* can no longer be used for prayer by this person. It is also common these days for the *tallit* of the deceased to be retained by the family and passed on to a living relative; another *tallit*, acquired for the purposes of burial, is used in its stead for burial.

Jewish tradition encourages simplicity in burial. A plain wooden coffin (with no metal hardware, again because it is not organic and will not decompose) is appropriate.

Tradition discourages fancy or expensive coffins. Following *Taharah* and dressing in *Tachrichim*, the casket remains closed. It is considered disrespectful to stare at someone who cannot look back at you. Jewish do not have visitation. However, if close family members feel the need to see the deceased one last time prior to the funeral, they may do so privately.

It is traditional to have people watch over the body from the time of death until burial, never permitting it to be alone. ***Shemirah***, the watching over of the body, is done out of respect. Often, a candle is lit at the head of the body, and the *shomer* (guard) recites psalms. A number of people may serve as *shomrim* (guards), taking turns sitting with the deceased and reciting psalms.

One who has lost a loved one is an **avel** (mourner). Judaism defines a mourner as one who enjoyed one of the primary relationships with the deceased: parent, child, sibling, spouse. The period of mourning, which lasts for the first year, is called ***Aveilut***. The period of time between death and burial is called ***aninut***, and during this period a mourner is not counting in a minyan.

Funeral

The funeral service may take place in a chapel, in the synagogue, or at the graveside. In many communities, a simple graveside funeral is the custom. There is no Jewish requirement for a chapel or synagogue funeral service.

Jewish tradition mandates burying the dead as soon as possible. Long ago, when families lived close together in small communities, burial was completed by sundown of the day of death (the Jewish day begins at sundown and ends the following sundown, hence burial

was completed on the day of death). Today, there are often relatives living in far-lying regions and the burial may be delayed for one day or even two days to accommodate these relatives. It should not be delayed any longer than is absolutely necessary.

Jewish tradition defines the following as mourners for the purposes of specific obligations and customs: The parents, spouse, siblings, and children of the deceased. Among these are *keriyah*. In ancient times, when people heard the news of the death of a loved one, they rent their garments as an expression of grief. Today, that custom is preserved by pinning a black ribbon to the lapel or clothing of the mourners (defined above) and permitting them to tear the ribbon. There is a line recited at the time this is done, and this custom is observed by the mourners privately prior to the funeral in the company of the rabbi or officiant.

Cut flowers are not part of Jewish tradition, and are strongly discouraged because in a few days time they will wither, providing a painful symbol of the family's loss. Instead, people are encouraged to make a donation to a charity of their choice, or one which the deceased supported to carry on the work of life. Sign-in books are not used at Jewish funerals, but if the family specifically requests one, it is permitted. Head coverings should be available to people attending the funeral service.

Graveside

If a funeral service was held at a synagogue or funeral chapel, the ceremony at the graveside will be brief. However, the full funeral service may take place at the graveside.

It is traditional for the mourners to symbolically complete the burial by shoveling

of dirt into the grave, the last commandment they are able to perform on behalf of the deceased. The back of a shovel is used for this purpose, signifying that this act of using the shovel is different from every other occasion of using a shovel.

Kaddish is a prayer recited in memory of the dead which is recited at the graveside.

At the conclusion of the graveside service, many rabbis and officiants will ask those present to form two lines leading away from the grave through which the mourners walk when leaving, in order that they can experience the consoling presence of all those who attended the funeral.

There is also a custom of placing a pebble on the gravestone of the deceased. There is no reason for this custom, one can only guess as to the origins of this tradition.

1. An early *Midrash* relates that each of Jacob's sons took a stone and put it on Rachel's grave to make up Rachel's tomb. Here and elsewhere we learn that by placing stones on the grave one participates in building the tombstone. We do not find any direct connection with our present practice, but we might ask if this is an ancient memory of this tradition.
2. In *Ta-amey Ha-Minagimim* (The Reasons for the Customs, pp. 470-471) of late nineteenth century author, Ithak Sperling is quoted: "We put grass and pebbles on the grave to show that the visitor was at the grave. It was a sort of calling card to tell the deceased that you have paid him a visit." ¹ Furthermore, we find in the *Shulhan Arukh*²: Now it is practiced after the grave is covered to pluck up grass or pick up a stone and put them on the gravestone,

¹ See also *Orah Haim* 224:8

² *Yoreh Deah* 376:4

which is only for the honor of the deceased that the grave was visited.

In former days one did not mark a grave with marble or granite with a fancy inscription, but one made a cairn of stones over it. Each mourner coming and adding a stone was effectively taking part in the Mitzvah of *matzevah* ("setting a stone") as well as or instead of *levayat ha-meyt* ("accompany the dead"). Of course, the dead were often buried where they had fallen, before urbanization and specialization of planning-use demanded formal cemeteries. Nowadays one can no longer bury a relative in the back garden, or on their farm, nor may a deceased traveler be interred by the roadside.

Therefore in our day one tends to stick a pebble on top of the tombstone as a relic of this ancient custom, and it is still clear that the more stones a grave has, the more the deceased is being visited and is therefore being honored. Each small pebble adds to the cairn - a nice moral message. This has become slightly spoiled by the cemetery authorities clearing accumulated pebbles off when they wash down the gravestones and cut the grass.

If you prefer, there is a psychoanalytic explanation of this custom: People in different parts of the world believed that the soul of the deceased haunts the grave for a long time. On account of that continued fear, prehistoric men rolled great rocks in front of graves, so that boulders should prevent the dead from escaping and plaguing living relatives. If so, what is the role of the small stones? Reik elucidates: The many small pebbles form a substitute for the one big boulder. It is as though the survivor who had visited the grave of a relative and so exhibits his piety to the dead, protects himself from their envy or hostility by putting those stones in their abode,

preventing the dead from escaping.³ Others explain: This ritual is a way of expressing our emotions and spiritual needs. We need physical acts to express these things for us, to make them concrete.

Returning to the Home

The family returns home from the funeral for a *Seudat Havra'ah* (meal of consolation) provided by relatives, friends, and neighbors. The meal is symbolic of the importance of the continuance of life even in the face of overwhelming grief. Prior to entering the house, some will observe the tradition of a ritual hand-washing outside the house. For this, a pitcher of water and basin, as well as a towel, are required.

A special candle, which burns for seven days, is lit, signifying the commencement of *Shiva*, the mourning period. Traditionally, the mourners will sit *shiva* for seven days (rising only for Shabbat and festivals, if they intervene). The day of the funeral counts as the first day, regardless of how late in the day the burial may have taken place. Prayer services are organized daily in the House of Mourning to enable the mourners to recite *Kaddish* for their loved one. There are many other customs which people may, or may not, observe. Among them are: covering mirrors (so that mourners don't feel compelled to concern themselves with vanity), sitting on low stools (symbolic of their suffering at this time), and abstaining from wearing leather (symbolic of the heightened sensitivity to life and death at this time).

Jewish tradition divides mourning into three successive periods which structure the mourners' lives and help them to gradually and gently return to the activities of life and work.

³ Theodor Reik, *Pagan Rites in Judaism*, 1964, pp. 44, 48.

Shiva: The first period is the seven-day *Shiva* period, when the mourners abstain from all work and sit together at home receiving visitors who provide company and consolation. Friends and neighbors provide meals and take care of day-to-day tasks for the mourners. Today, families decide together how long they will sit in mourning.

Sheloshim: Following *shiva*, through the thirtieth day counting from the burial (*sheloshim* means "30"), the mourners may return to work and school, but they abstain from most forms of entertainment, such as parties and movies. They continue to recite *Kaddish* daily.

Eleven months: From the end of *Sheloshim* for the first eleven months, the mourners recited *Kaddish* daily, but after *Sheloshim*, they may engage in their normal schedule of activities.

Yahrzeit: *Yahrzeit* is the anniversary of the loved one's death. It is customary to light a candle in memory of the deceased on the anniversary of death and to attend a synagogue service to recited *Kaddish* on that day.

Yizkor: The memory of deceased loved ones is also evoked on Yom Kippur and festivals and *Kaddish* is recited in their memory during *Yizkor*, the memorial service.

Unveiling

In the Torah, we read that Jacob set up a marker for Rachel (Genesis 35:20). Hence Jewish graves are marked with the name of the deceased. Rabban Gamaliel's instructions for burial emphasized equality and simplicity and thus large, ornate stone markers were discouraged. His son, Rabbi Simeon ben Gamaliel is quoted in Beraishit Rabbah (82:11) as saying, "We need not erect monuments for the righteous; their accomplishments are their memorials." In fact, stone markers were not normative until the

Middle Ages; Rabbi Solomon Adret (13th century, Spain) prescribed the use of a *matzeivah* (burial marker).

These days, it is traditional to mark a grave with a stone monument or metal plate on the ground. This is generally done some time during the first year, prior to the *Yahrzeit* (first year anniversary of the death), but traditions differ widely. Some communities feel it is important to unveil the marker prior to the *Yahrzeit*; others do not do so until the *Yahrzeit* has passed. There is no "right and wrong" about this matter; rather there is local custom.

The ceremony for unveiling is brief and usually involves close family members and friends, who gather at the grave to remember the deceased and honor his/her memory.

When people visit the grave, they often leave a small stone on the marker as a sign that they have visited. This has been explained as a reflection of the eternality of the soul: Just as the stone lasts forever, so too does the soul live forever. This has also been explained as a symbol of God, *tzur Yisrael*, the Rock of Israel. For a fuller explanation of the source and meaning of this tradition, please click [here](#).

Other resources:

The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning by Rabbi Maurice Lamm (1969, Jonathan David Publishers).

A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort by Dr. Ron Wolfson (1993, The Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs)

Jewish Reflections on Death edited by Rabbi Jack Riemer (1974, Schocken Books)

Living When a Loved One Has Died by Rabbi Earl A. Grollman (1977, Beacon Press)

Gates of Mitzvah: A Guide to the Jewish Life Cycle edited by Rabbi Simeon J. Maslin (1979, Central Conference of American Rabbis)